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PRAGMATISM AND THE IRRELEVANT

PRAGMATISM has had many names bestowed upon it. Early in its history, because of its emphasis on the relativity of knowledge, it was identified with subjective idealism. At length a scandal leaked out. It became known that pragmatism details to the process of knowing only a nervous system and an environment which stimulates that system in a unique manner. Immediately it was whispered in certain quarters that the doctrine should be called materialism. Still another, and radically different, kinship is claimed for it in Miss Ackerman's stimulating article *Some Aspects of Pragmatism and Hegel*.¹ It is objective idealism, according to this account, which the characteristics of pragmatism reveal.

A family resemblance on this side pragmatists are eager to have recognized. They claim that objective idealism and pragmatism display a common and distinctive trait in the stand they have taken as regards the organic relationship of consciousness and its objects. An insuperable dualism, in this connection, they remind us, is subscribed to by all other philosophical creeds. Miss Ackerman, however, goes further. She asserts that along with the point of resemblance just stated go others, by implication, at least, which are so fundamental that pragmatism has nothing whatsoever to distinguish it from Hegelian idealism. It is a reincarnated spirit whose earlier embodiment left no new worlds to conquer.

In support of this conclusion she presents an analysis of the assumptions involved in the pragmatic theory of knowledge, pointing out the agreement between these assumptions and Hegel's deliverances in the *Phaenomenology*. Pragmatism claims that knowledge is a process which is purposive and continuous and which gives, at times, the fulfilment of anticipation. But if this is true it must be granted that there is a structural counterpart of knowledge which connects up the successive stages of the process. It would be impossible to entertain purposes if one refused to believe that a future which somewhat resembles the past is guaranteed. Suppose, for example, that I am watching my neighbors newly-hatched chickens with the secret purpose of supplying myself later with tender "fryers." I must necessarily make predictions concerning the growth of the chicks, the continued efficacy of certain midnight methods, the survival of my appetite for "fryers," and other conditions too numerous to be stated. Let us suppose besides that I am called to account for my theft. My knowledge of the justice who probes my case grows out of my knowledge of my neighbor's chick-

¹ This JOURNAL, Vol. XV., pp. 337-357.

ens. In fact, it comes as the fulfilment of certain unwelcome anticipations which thrust themselves upon me one dark night. These facts show that the future both is and is not present in the past. For this is the puzzle which continuity and fulfilment present. "The only intelligible explanation," to quote from Miss Ackerman, "is that both past and future are parts of a more inclusive whole where they are interdependent elements in one relational system."

Add to the above list one other tenet of pragmatism and its identification with objective idealism is complete. Pragmatism subscribes to the "trans-individuality" of knowledge. This point does not need to be argued. Every manifesto carries with it the implication that there is an interrelation of the knowledge processes of proclaimer and hearers. But if this is true, then it must be granted that the structural counterpart of knowledge, observable in the thinking of an individual mind, extends itself under that of all minds, making a relational whole. It is, then, the absolute in all of its fullness before which pragmatism must bow. Deny the all-inclusive structure, whether in part or in whole, and the pragmatic logic and metaphysics change from an intelligible and highly satisfying account of the universe to the babbling of madness. We are moved to cry, "Thank God for Hegelism!"

Common sense, to be sure, will not join with us in this thanksgiving. That one can predict, observe continuity and fulfilment in the process of thinking, and have intercourse with one's fellows without subscribing to a total and fixed structure of things is verified, it tells us, by the fact that the unlearned do all of these things. The *Phaenomenology* and similar discussions are read late, if at all, and it is true that the *οἱ πολλοὶ* do not gain information about the structural counterpart unassisted. But this objection is irrelevant. Miss Ackerman, if I understood her, does not assert that all persons are sages. She states, rather, that one finds the structural counterpart when the logic of purposiveness, continuity and fulfilment of experience is reflected upon.

This brings us to the crucial point of the discussion. Let us grant that if we stop where pragmatism claims to, the concepts under discussion are unintelligible. Does the addition of the supplement which Hegelism furnishes make them meaningful? This is the question, I believe, which should be considered before one joins the singing of the *Te Deum*.

The following characteristics of the remedial "structure" are stressed. First, it is *a part of* and at the same time *apart from* the process of knowing; it is a *counterpart*. Second, it performs a function; it makes a unity out of numerous segments. Third, it

does its work in a manner that brings forth a specific form, namely, one that is fixed and all-inclusive.

Each of these traits of the structure raises a problem which the introduction of the structure was supposed to remove. The puzzle of continuity, which is that the future is in the past and yet not in the past, has an exact parallel in the structure which is both a part and yet not a part of the process of knowledge. The problem which fulfilment presents when no provision is made to hold together aim and goal, is repeated in the functioning of the structure, which has nothing to tie together the beginning and end of its praiseworthy act. And this specific problem of the structure becomes the more noticeable when it is recalled that it is a set type of relationship which it makes. Why the structure should not create an unstatic and incomplete complex, since it has no structure to hold it in the straight and narrow way of objective idealism, is not made clear.

Meaning involves relationship. Pragmatism is said to neglect this fact, and is, therefore, found wanting. But by the same process the acid test for Hegelism also is discovered. The structural counterpart of knowledge as defined is devoid of all relationship. How then can meaning be read into it? And if it is unmeaning, how much does one gain by taking it as the explanation of knowledge? Hegelism thus becomes its own critic.

We have not given pragmatism a hearing on the question: How is knowledge possible? It explains the purposiveness, continuity and fulfilment of the process of knowledge in terms of the behavior of the body and its environment. It finds that when knowing occurs the body is stimulated in such a manner that it prepares for the future before it arrives. The sight of a red apple causes my mouth to water even before I taste the apple. I say that the apple looks delicious. In this manner the future is *proposed* and *gets into* the past. Fulfilment, on the other hand, is adjustment. In the case at hand it is the behavior of the salivary glands proving appropriate when I eat the apple. The misadjustment which occurs if I bite into a hard crab apple after I have made preparations for deliciousness illustrates the opposite.

Whether this is a correct statement of the behavior of body and environment it is not our purpose to consider. The cogency of the method which is implied in this description, however, the discussion of the preceding pages would seem to make evident. Hegelism would have us go beyond knowledge to explain knowledge. But until the manner of *going beyond* is made clear one seems to play the part of wisdom in confining all explanations to the brute facts of experience.

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